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AN ORIENTATION TO INDUSTRIAL
RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

LAWRENCE SCHLEMMER

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University of Natal • King George V Ave • Durban • Natal • 4001 • Tel. 253411



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Indicator South Africa
Centre for Applied Social Sciences
University of Natal
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Both on the side of management and labour, industry in South Africa is fast equipping itself with the skills necessary for a system of negotiation and bargaining which is likely to become more and more prominent in industrial life. One index of this is the increasing number of seminars, workshops and conferences on Industrial Relations on management side. Although less public, training sessions and workshops for shop stewards and organisers on the side of organised black labour are probably increasing at an almost equal rate.

Despite this escalation of skills-training, on management side at any rate there still seems to be a great deal of uncertainty about what the broader implications of a strong independent black labour movement may be in the longer run. Some managers take the view that it will usher in a period of labour instability and mounting management-worker conflict which will have to be contained by forces outside of industry itself.

Others take a more optimistic view and expect that while it will bring with it a period of heightened labour conflict and strike-proneness, the system of conflict will at least be stable and predictable, with neither management nor labour losing the viability of its functions. One also finds some very optimistic views expressed by managers who see possibilities of the formalisation or institutionalisation of conflict leading to an era of labour peace with strikes a rare exception.

Such views are seldom based on any systematic analysis of the emerging system. More often than not they are the expression of sentiments, fears or hopes. One is tempted to say that while management is fast equipping itself with the techniques of Industrial Relations, few of the numerous sessions on "IR" organised for industry provide the basis for insight — an understanding of the more basic social processes involved.

This brief paper is an attempt to increase insight at a more basic level. It does not pretend to be original. It will do no more than compliment the detailed and sophisticated analyses of noted experts

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in the field like Bendix, Douwes Dekker, Swart, Roux van der Merwe, Webster and other serious analysts.

1. PHILOSOPHIES AND IDEOLOGIES

Ideologies, while focussing understanding in a particular direction, obscure it in others. Although most people tend to think that only the "other side" has ideologies, all parties in Labour Relations in South Africa have ideological views.

1.1 Management views on Industrial Relations are most fundamentally influenced by how managers see their own role. One can distinguish at least the following:

- The "divine right to manage". Some managers take the classical 19th century view that the fact that they are the appointed agents of ownership of capital and plant gives them legitimate total power in the workplace. This may sound archaic as expressed above but it is an assumption that virtually all people make in regard to privately-owned goods or property.

In terms of this view there is simply no justification for any challenge to the right of control over the production process. Hence attempts by organised labour to influence or share in the decisions governing the production process are very basically seen as illegitimate, as a pathology and in a sense as a form of insurrection. The views may not be very frequently expressed in public but all the basic assumptions associated with this view are alive and well.

- In most current socialist societies, paradoxically, managers make a similar assumption. There it is based not on ownership but on bureaucratic authority, backed by political power. Industrial conflict is also viewed as a pathology.
- The most common modern management position is that the production process is a system of different roles, responsibilities and

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statuses. The assumption made is that personnel benefits, human relations approaches and sound ongoing communication can defuse conflict between the higher and lower status participants. Conflict is seen to be a constant problem but avoidable if management techniques are particularly sophisticated. It is this position which creates a demand for a variety of consultants with all manner of fairly superficial prescriptions for success. Trade Unions are seen as basically redundant. If they exist the idea is to minimise their effects and reduce conflict as far as possible.

- Another position among management is the realistic assumption that divisions in the workplace parallel divisions in society. In this position conflict between workers and management is assumed to be inevitable. Management becomes untenable unless the additional assumption is made that such conflict can be controlled and "institutionalised". Industrial Relations and the recognition of unions are seen as opportunities to shape and participate in a system of controlled and bounded conflict.

In this position one finds a confident and optimistic attitude and a less-confident orientation. The former sees a strike, for example, as a variation in a process of ongoing negotiation. The latter sees a strike as a breakdown of a process.

These are ideal typical views and any single management team will reflect a mixture of positions. All these views also have a measure of truth. Generally speaking, however, all the views except the last one above tend to oversimplify the significance and the dynamics of Industrial Relations.

1.2 Trade Union views of the production process also reveal differences in ideological position. Very broadly one can identify the following in trade union leadership:

- A view of unionised labour relations as simply facilitating the necessary solidarity among workers to bargain and negotiate effectively in the management labour arena. The role of management is accepted and varying degrees of self-conscious

co-operation between management and unions are possible. This point of view, like its equivalent in management, would see a strike as a step or stage in an ongoing process of negotiation. The system is accepted.

- Another view is that organised labour is part of a wider "struggle" between classes in society. Policy is not only determined by factors in the workplace but by circumstances in the relationship between the working class and the "bourgeoisie" in the wider society.

Underlying aims are not revolutionary, however. One typical aim would be what one would call a "social democratic" society with a mixed economy and a strong working class influence in government.

A more developed version of this position at the level of industry itself is what one may loosely call the workers participation or "co-determination" position particularly of German and Dutch Trade Unions. The end-goal is some form of joint worker-management decision-making in labour policy in industry.

- A more radical trade union position is that private-sector management is essentially illegitimate and a manifestation of one-sided ownership of production in society.

The unspoken ideals may well be revolutionary but in most western countries and in South Africa, the socialist trade union leadership tends more often than not to operate within the constraints of the overall system. The result often is that rhetoric and concrete policy diverge. Perhaps the greatest effect is a disinclination among this leadership to wish to take negotiation to the point of joint decision-making or co-operative action with management.

Hence while this category of leadership is ideologically more distant from management, the actual policies for the shop floor are not necessarily tougher than those of the "social democrats". The latter may be more insistent than the more radical groups on a day-to-day influence on management policy.

- In South Africa a variant of the "radical" position would be one which emphasises a race rather than a class conflict. The black consciousness or community-rooted black unions would be in this position. The position is difficult to typify because the racial agenda, as it were, implies a set of attitudes rather than indicating basic policies.

In South Africa all the unions which are actively involved in the Industrial Relations process tend to accept the "rules of the game" of labour relations, whether by desire or because of constraint. The different positions on the ideological spectrum denote differences in mood and attitude to management rather than behaviour. Hence one has to look at what black unions do rather than what they say.

One of the most important constraints, obviously, is the framework of controls laid down by the government aimed at preventing the introduction of political issues into labour relations. Another important constraint is the limitations imposed by the rank-and-file black workers themselves. As we shall see presently, it would seem that the typical black worker is not inclined towards the use of labour relations machinery for a great deal more than the redress of specifically work-related grievances and problems at this stage.

3. A MODEL OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS PROCESS

The range of labour ideologies or viewpoints outlined above are all present in full measure in the arena of Industrial Relations in South Africa. This is no more than one would expect and certainly makes for a healthy interplay of forces. However, at the same time each one of these positions tends to obscure at least part of the dynamics of the Industrial Relations' process. There is perhaps good reason, then, for the following attempt to depict the full scope of Industrial Relations as it occurs and is likely to occur in South Africa.

3.1 Components of the model

Participants in the Industrial Relations' process tend to work with one and sometimes more of the following frameworks of explanation:

- Institutional-legal models
- Political models
- Economic models
- Psychological models
- Sociological models

Typical examples of these different models can be depicted as follows. All have been presented deliberately with some oversimplification, for the sake of brevity. (See page 7)

Each one of the models presented represents only a few levels or aspects of the total range of processes involved in Industrial Relations. Each one, however, is also important in its contribution to the overall dynamics of the situation. A full understanding of the process requires that all these different models be integrated and reconciled into a single, comprehensive framework.

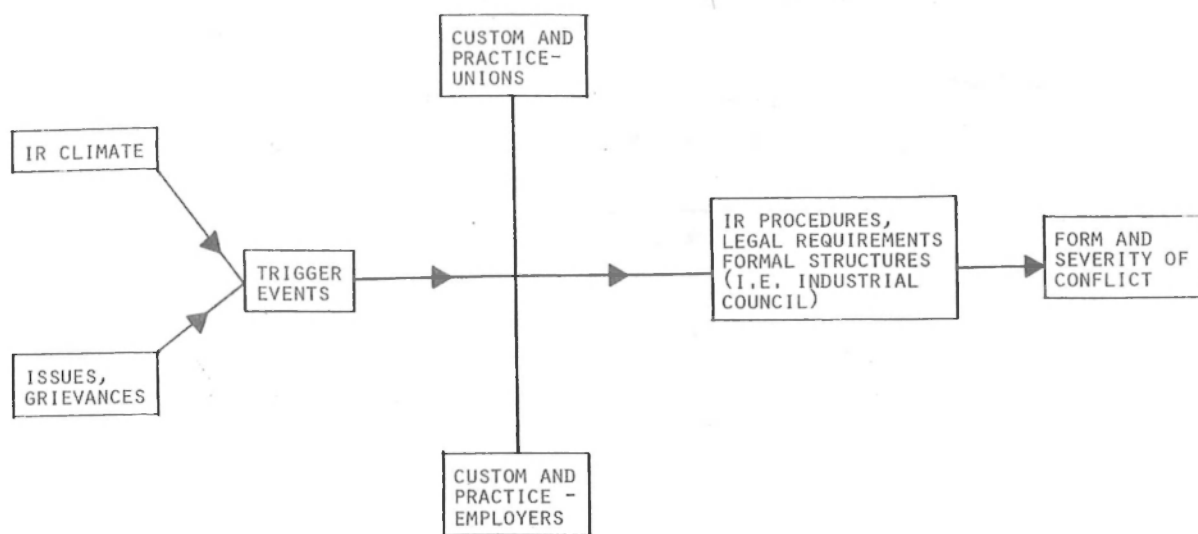
3.2 Towards an integrated model

Immediately a difficulty arises, however. Any direct combination of the separate models is likely to be so complicated as to be confusing rather than helpful in understanding the labour relations process. Yet this complexity is real. No wonder such a demand appears to exist for consultants who provide intelligible simplifications of the issue.

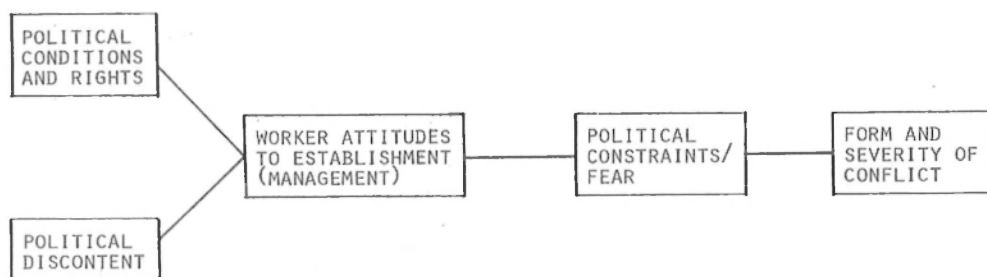
Yet simplifications are dangerous. They may well retain validity and explanatory power - under some conditions in the labour process. They inevitably fail in others.

For this reason we will attempt a compromise - an integrated model which avoids the full complexity but which is an attempt to avoid oversimplification. (See page 8)

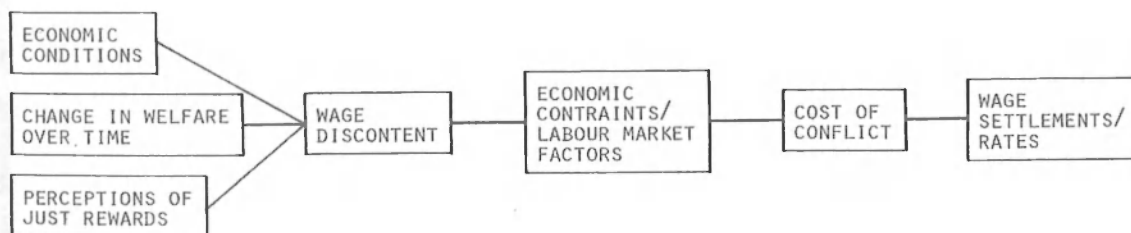
INSTITUTIONAL - LEGAL MODEL



POLITICAL MODEL



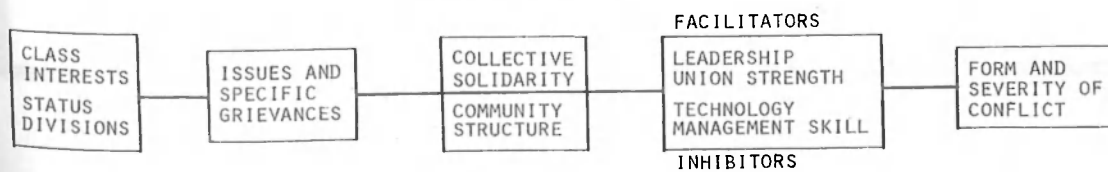
ECONOMIC MODEL

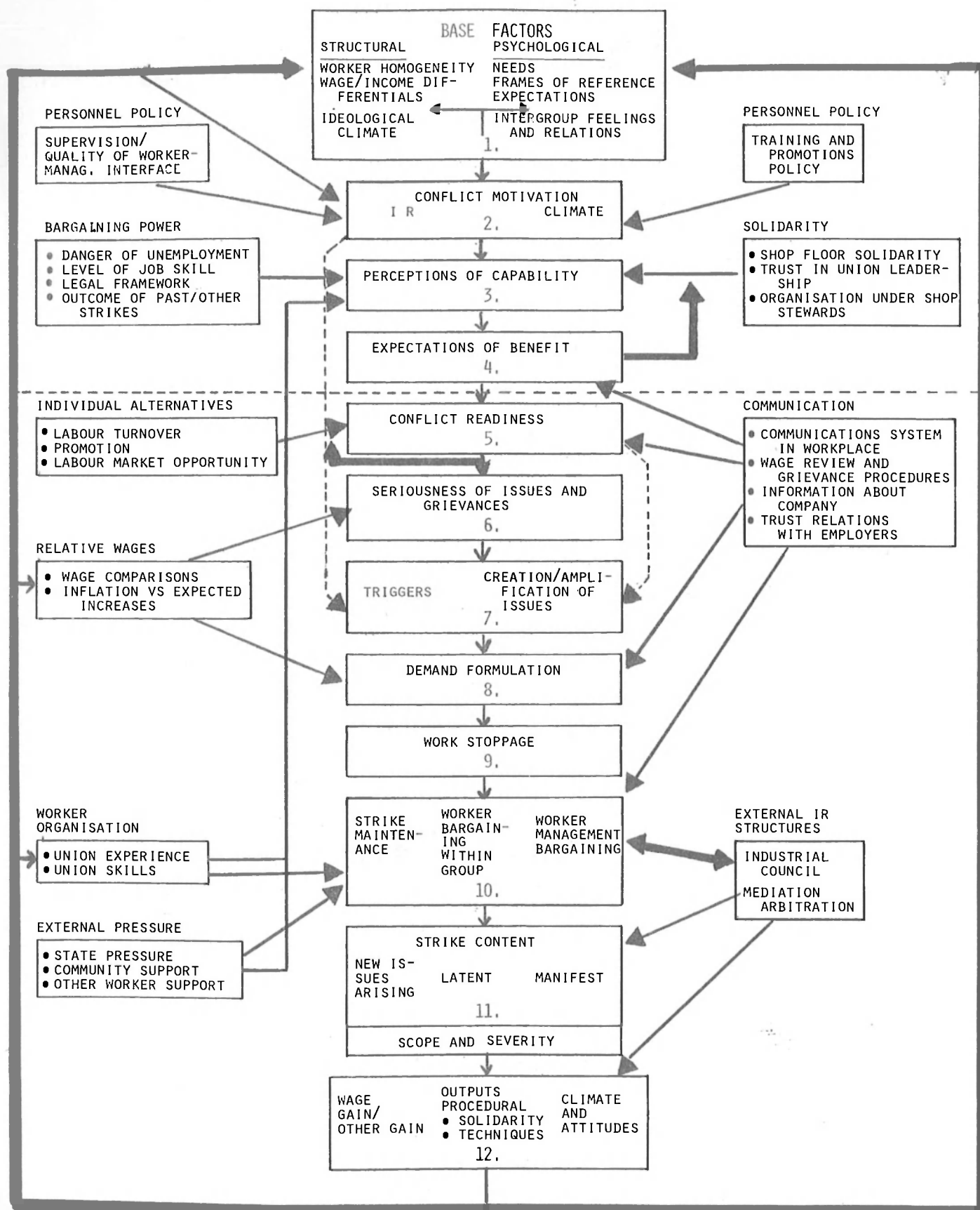


PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL



SOCIOLOGICAL MODEL



AN INTEGRATED MODEL¹⁾

1) To a small extent this model has been influenced by a model proposed by John E. Kelly and Nigel Nicholson, "The Causation of Strikes: A Review of Theoretical Approaches and the Potential Contribution of Social Psychology", *Human Relations*, Vol. 33, No. 12, 1980, pp.853-883.

There is nothing particularly new about the integrated model. Every element in it is perfectly obvious within one or more of the frameworks discussed above. The main point about it is that the model serves as a reminder of some processes and implications that are often overlooked by managers, Industrial Relations practitioners and unionists in their day-to-day strategies. Some of the more important possibilities can be summarised as follows:

1) Labour conflict simply cannot be reduced to simple action slogans like "class conflict", "issue creation", "worker militancy", etc. etc. It is a multi-level process. Every action is the result of a process in which motivations penetrate through layers of constraints and facilitating factors. The outcome always reflects a degree of intensity which is determined by the balance of constraints and facilitations.

Both management and unionists probably have to simplify the factors involved in order to protect their own values and interests. The Industrial Relations practitioner or mediator dare not do this. If he/she does he becomes simply the agent of one or the other party and cannot contribute real insights either way.

2) Every labour disturbance or strike is an opportunity as well as a cost to both management and unions. The outputs of a strike are fundamental in helping to shape the climate and even the basic worker perceptions which will influence further strikes. For both unions and management, a labour dispute is precisely the time when "investments" are made in future industrial relations.

3) For labour action to penetrate past "conflict readiness" (level 4) a number of conditions must exist. Given the nature of South African industrial society, if this were not the case, strikes would be so commonplace as to render industrial production untenable. The policies of both management and unions are most crucial at the levels before which worker motivations break through into the actual build-up to a strike.

4) Certain levels can be circumvented. Union organisation can capitalise on specific triggers and grievances in a workforce which while motivated is far from "ready" for worker-management conflict. This, however, is a short-run strategy and ultimately must weaken the legitimacy of union organisation. Management would be wise to learn to recognise this.

5) Similarly, management, if skillful or determined enough, can block (as opposed to remedy) the process at or before level 4 (beyond which it cannot be blocked very easily). This may be the equivalent of a short-run union strategy and will simply lead to an intensification of motivational pressures.

6) Perhaps the most important point to be made about the model is that it illustrates the complexity of the process of labour conflict and in this also illustrates a system of checks and balances. It is relatively easy for strong leadership, whether radical or conservative to, as it were, "hi-jack" a simple process of social action. It is also fairly easy to achieve limited results fairly quickly.

However, when a system is as complex as the model tends to suggest, there are always a number of factors which are beyond the reach of any particular form of manipulation. These factors, often interacting on one another as the model shows, make for a considerable measure of sluggishness (perhaps one can call it inherent stability) in the ongoing process.

Hence, all the oft-expressed fears about "agitation" or politicisation of the labour movement are very superficial indeed. The black labour movement in South Africa today is without any doubt "politicised" to a considerable degree, and many people are available to attempt to manipulate it to their own ends (among workers, management and the state). The process of labour conflict, however, will continue to run according to its own rules.

Therefore much of the loose speculation about possibilities of sudden destabilisation is very largely a waste of time.

4. SOME KEYNOTE FEATURES OF BLACK LABOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA

The point made immediately above is easily illustrated in our situation. Some results from empirical studies which are presented below in a sense mirror what many perceptive observers today say about trade union leadership. While a few of the secretaries and organisers in the black labour movement are no doubt very radical in their own goals, the way they actually react in their formal roles in the movement is very largely determined by institutional pressures. The "system" tends to govern individuals rather than the other way around.

In research conducted in the Centre for Applied Social Sciences, for example, we have found that 80 percent or more of a nation-wide sample of black migrant workers perceived employers as racially discriminating, exploitative, inclined to want to replace blacks with machines and as actively co-operative towards the state and the police. Only some four out-of-ten of these workers felt that employers paid as much as possible without losing profit, and only 10 percent considered that they tried to keep blacks by appealing to the government.

In other study among industrial workers in Durban, less than one-third of a sample of 400 blacks indicated basic trust in employers.

Among the migrant worker sample referred to above, a very significant correlation between political discontent and job-discontent was evident. General community dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with pass laws, both widespread, had a more powerful effect on perceptions of the working environment than did wage-levels, or more even than radical ideological commitments.

These results, very briefly, give some idea of the basic

motivations to conflict behaviour present among black workers (level 1.).

Yet, when the same groups of blacks are asked whether black trade unions should become, or are, an avenue for the redress of basic political grievances, less than 20 percent agree. Roughly the same percentage in one study among 150 black male workers in Durban wished to see any overseas boycott of South African industry as a lever against Apartheid.

Generally-speaking, when it comes to concrete strategies, black worker attitudes shift from a position of quite radical discontent to a dominantly pragmatic position. When it comes to their perceptions of the benefits of trade union action, they emphasise the specifics of shop-floor problems and wage grievances.

These attitude contrasts are no more than a reflection of the kind of constraints and influences which the model suggests. There is a great pressure of discontent at level one — the base factors — but these strong forces are qualified and contained at more specific levels of action.

This need not always be the case. Quite a good deal depends on how well managers understand the total labour process and how constructively they respond. Both these requirements mean that managers dare not oversimplify the issues.

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